

Mark 14:53–72

⁵³ And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. ⁵⁴ And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵ Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. ⁵⁶ For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷ And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ⁵⁸ “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’ ” ⁵⁹ Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰ And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” ⁶¹ But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” ⁶² And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” ⁶³ And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? ⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵ And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophesy!” And the guards received him with blows.

⁶⁶ And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, ⁶⁷ and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, “You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” ⁶⁸ But he denied it, saying, “I neither know nor understand what you mean.” And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. ⁶⁹ And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” ⁷⁰ But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” ⁷¹ But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.” ⁷² And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

Sermon Manuscript: Mark 14:53–72

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the passion reading just read we follow *two* interrogations going on at the same time—Jesus at the centre of both of them.

The one was dominated by *false witnesses* and their reports about things Jesus was supposed to have said. Their stories didn't agree, so met with nothing more than Jesus' silence, the prosecution's case imploded. The case against Jesus crumbled and in tatters, the high priest seeks a new charge against Jesus on the spot, and asks him straight up: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" "I am," says Jesus, unashamed, and is crucified for the *truth* on a *false charge of blasphemy*.

But we know how this story continues:" that He who is the Truth is not so easily gotten of! He would rise from the dead to live and reign over all things.

The other interrogation is the opposite in almost every respect, though it too is really about *Jesus*. As the high priest is interrogating Jesus formally, one of his servant girls outside spies Peter and speaks a simple truth to him: "*You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.*" Not a question exactly, is it, but an observation. A simple, truthful witness. But in that climate also an accusation: You're with *him*!

And this time it is the accused who lies: "*I do not know or understand what you are saying,*" says Peter, moves away from the girl, trying to evade further interrogation. But this, too, is a truth that will not go away. Far from crumbling, this line of interrogation only gains momentum as the girl insists and says to the bystanders, "*This man is one of them,*" and they in turn direct this truth back at Peter again: "*Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.*"

Peter, the first to insist *he* would never deny Jesus, had been “willing in spirit.” But in those moments he proved what Jesus had said earlier: “the flesh is weak.”

Now we know how Peter’s story ends too: that though he now wishes this truth away in this moment and denies it with oaths, the Resurrected Jesus himself would later reinstate his faithless disciple, restoring the relationship. Good news for Peter! whose denial of Jesus would *not* become a life habit or come to *define him*, but would remain Christ’s disciple and witness! And good news for us, for who of us can stand unless Christ raises us from the fallen heap we inevitably fall in when we trust ourselves to our own strength?

But for now we witness his moment of trial and failure, a haunting story with a warning for all Christians, including you and me.

He is afraid for his life, and who wouldn’t be? Wouldn’t you or I be too?

He wasn’t looking for trouble, but he was a disciple. So when trouble found him anyway *because he was Jesus’ disciple*, his fear moved him to deny his discipleship! Before the interrogating eyes of a servant girl, and the mob of bystanders, he was ashamed of belonging to Christ.

What about us? When the world casts public shame on *Christian teachings* and on *Christians themselves* for what we believe, teach and confess, aren’t we also confronted with a similar temptation to the one Peter faced? The temptation to be *ashamed* of Christ and his Word before the world, before *people*?

For Peter, one kind of shame quickly gives way to another. By the end of our reading Peter is *ashamed* of himself as it dawns on him what he’s done, and where his fears and thoughts have taken him. How crushing that rooster’s crow must have been, as Jesus’ words earlier that day came flooding back to him: “*Truly, I tell you, this*

very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” Ashamed, Peter wept bitterly.

We see that shame in a larger light, as earlier in St Mark’s Gospel we hear Jesus saying: “*whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*” (Mark 8:38).

When Christ’s reign is revealed and this world and its kingdoms have passed away, how small *they*—and the shame they heaped upon Christ and his Word—will have seemed! And how misplaced and foolish will our fear of *being* ashamed of the Gospel before *people* then appear.

Indeed, Jesus had already rebuked Peter for setting his mind “*on the things of people*” and not “*on the things of God*” (Mark 8:33). And don’t we also need this warning, lest *shame before people* becomes the only kind of shame we would avoid, as Peter now did in these moments before the rooster crowed?

So the example of Peter is instructive for us in several ways. Though we, like Peter, seek to follow our Lord and are not *looking for* trouble, as disciples we should not be surprised when *trouble finds us* on account of Christ and His Word. And it encourages us *not* to fear the shame of the cross.

But Peter’s failure also holds the mirror of the law up to *our own* vacillating hearts, doesn’t it. It warns us of the weakness of *our* flesh (willing though we may be in spirit), and teaches us to seek God’s strength in prayer lest we fall into temptation while *leaning on our own strength*—just as Jesus had instructed the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But Peter's failures and what they reveal are only half the story from our passion reading. For while all this was going on Jesus was making the good confession and receiving the sentence of death, even *for Peter* in those moments, even *for us*.

So let's leave Peter where he is and take a closer look at what happened there, inside the high priest's house.

The false witnesses whose testimony did not agree had said of Jesus: "We heard him say, '*I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.*'"

They were twisting Jesus' words, of course. As we read in John 2, Jesus had answered a demand for a sign with *these* words:

"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Not another. Indeed, not a temple "made with human hands" at all! BUT, as St John explains, Jesus "*was speaking about the temple of his body.*"

For, as St John *also* tells us at the beginning of his Gospel, in the Person of Jesus Christ "the Word Became Flesh and "*tabernacled among us.*" His body was the temple to end all temples! The place of perfect harmony between God and man, the uncreated Son of God *in the Flesh*, where Divinity and Humanity was and forever remains perfectly united.

And their testimony was false in another respect also. It would not be *Jesus* who would destroy This Temple, but his accusers!—the very leaders before whom he now stood, who sought his destruction by that dreaded Roman instrument of execution, *the cross*.

In the high priest's house stood the true, enduring temple of God Most High about to be destroyed, yes—but he would raise temple *imperishable!* just as he promised. **For you.**

For you, Jesus remained silent, not coming to his own defense.

For you, Jesus confessed the saving truth: I am the Christ, the Son of the Blessed.

For you, Jesus let his body be destroyed so that he might take your sin with him to the grave!

For you, Jesus bore all shame before *both God and people*, so your *shame before God* might be removed, like Peter's!

For you, Jesus raised the temple of his body on the third day, that he might *unite you to himself* and *reconcile you to the Father* by that most blessed instrument of Divine grace, *your baptism!*

For you, Jesus is even now "*seated at the right hand of power*" just as he declared before the high priest.

And **for you** Jesus will "*come with the clouds of heaven*" as he promised, unashamed to call you his own! Unashamed to call you his own!

For he has forgiven and reinstated you, just as he did his disciple Peter. So even now you stand a child of God, reborn and washed clean through your baptism *in truth*, as Jesus Himself is The Truth who *does not* and *will not* go away.

And the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, now and forever. **Amen.**